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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000049

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S, INR/AF
PRETORIA FOR ORA, DATT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/4/2020

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KMCA](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: LAND REFORM ISSUE CONTINUES TO REVEAL FAULT LINES WITHIN
LESOTHO GOVERNMENT

REF: A. 09 Maseru 400 B. 09 Maseru 447

MASERU 00000049 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Elizabeth C. Power, Deputy Chief of Mission.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: Minister of Local Government and Chieftainship
Ponts'o Sekatle accused Ambassador Nolan of betraying her by
engaging in a public diplomacy campaign around the land reform
bill currently before parliament, although she later
acknowledged that post was forced to take action to counter
negative press against the Millennium Challenge Corporation
(MCC) and the USG in general. While the meeting began and ended
on very cordial terms, Sekatle's aggressive attitude during the
meeting and unwillingness to listen to any concerns about the
land bill not only confirm her image as one of the GOL
hardliners, but also underline the potential for political
violence caused by the GOL's inflexible posture on political
issues concerning the opposition. End summary.

12. (C) In a February 3 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister
Sekatle expressed her sense of "betrayal" and shock at the
Embassy's public diplomacy efforts around the contentious land
reform bill that is currently before parliament (ref A).
Sekatle stated that the public letter written by MCC explaining
the USG role in the land bill debate was improper interference
in Lesotho's domestic politics and an expression of a lack of
confidence in her personal ability to get the bill passed as
required by the terms of the MCC Compact. Noting that the
governing Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) holds a majority
in parliament, she said, "I told you I would drive this bill
through parliament," and there had been no need for the Embassy
to take any action related to land reform. She spoke
disparagingly of the opposition, characterizing them as scheming
politicians who would tell us one thing but tell their
constituents something else and implying that the USG had been
duped by the opposition's positive responses to our public
diplomacy efforts.

13. (C) The Ambassador thanked Sekatle for her candor and
expressed regret for any offense taken, but laid out the logic
behind the Embassy's public outreach campaign, which included
meetings with opposition leaders, a press conference, and the
public letter. With the USG under public attack as having
pushed land reform on the GOL in order to gain control of
Lesotho's minerals and water, the Embassy had to take action to
educate the politicians and the public about the history and
goals of the land reform activity as defined in the Compact.
Sekatle acknowledged that defense of our national image was an
important factor that she had not considered, and she agreed
with the Ambassador that more careful coordination around
problem areas would help avoid similar misunderstandings in the
future.

14. (C) Comment: Sekatle's combative attitude regarding the

land bill, lack of public engagement on the issue of land reform, and disregard for the concerns of the opposition lend credence to her image as one of the cabinet's hardliners (ref B); on the other hand, moderate cabinet members such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Tsekoa and Minister of Communications Metsing told the Ambassador that they applauded the Embassy for engaging in effective public diplomacy by engaging the opposition on the land bill. We believe that Sekatle's strategy had been to say that the USG had forced the land bill on Lesotho and the GOL had no choice but to accept it. Her description of her plan to pass the bill as "driving it through parliament" indicates that the LCD has no apparent plans for outreach around the bill, either with the general public or with members of the LCD party, who thus far have not been engaged on the issue. Given Lesotho's history of strict party discipline and an opposition whose role is to simply oppose the government's proposals, post expects that the LCD will dictate that its members of parliament support the bill without any further discussion. Despite their private statements to MCC that the land bill may actually be good for the country, the various opposition parties are likely to oppose it even though the LCD's majority will ensure that the bill passes - if party discipline holds.

15. (C) Comment continued: Counting on the party discipline of their parliamentary majority appears to be the GOL's only strategy for passing the land bill, further confirming the unwillingness of the Prime Minister and hardline cabinet ministers to engage in any type of meaningful political discussion. It is not clear how much internal explanation of the bill's components and history has been done for LCD members of parliament, who have not participated in any of post's public outreach activities thus far; it is likely that they have no further information than is available in the press. This seeming lack of knowledge, when combined with an LCD power base that is centered in the rural areas of the country where land reform is particularly contentious and misunderstood, could be quite explosive. The LCD is risking a revolt by its members of parliament - or a major aisle-crossing, if LCD members decide to join the opposition in rejecting land reform to appease their

MASERU 00000049 002.2 OF 002

rural constituents. In either of these scenarios, a destabilization of Lesotho's fragile political situation is possible. The potential for political violence is always present under the surface here; post will continue to monitor and report on any developments. End comment.
NOLAN